Slate

Hapless, Disorganized, and Irrational

What the Boston bombers had in common with most would-be terrorists

By: John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart – April 22, 2013

Between Sept. 12, 2001, and last Monday, some 52 cases came to light in which the United States itself has been, or apparently has been, targeted for terrorism by Islamist extremists, whether based in the United States or abroad.

By far the most striking difference between the Boston Marathon killings and these earlier cases is that, for the first time, terrorists actually were able to assemble and detonate bombs. Many previous plotters harbored visions of carrying out bombings, and in 10 of the cases, they were supplied with fantasy-fulfilling, if bogus, bombs by obliging FBI informants. But until Boston, no would-be terrorists had been able to make and set one off on their own. And, except for four bombs detonated on the London transport system in 2005, nor has any terrorist in the United Kingdom. This is surprising in part because in the 1970s there were hundreds of terrorist incidents on U.S. soil, most of them bombings, killing 72 people.

In many other respects, however, the Boston Marathon bombing is quite similar to the other 52 cases. For example, the Boston perpetrators were clearly not suicidal, which is the standard in American cases. In only six of the earlier plots were the perpetrators clearly willing to die in their terrorist effort.

And except for their ability to fabricate and detonate bombs, the Boston terrorists do not seem to have been any more competent than most of their predecessors. The Department of Homeland Security, in assessing what it ominously calls "the nature of the terrorist adversary," is fond of stressing their determination, persistence, relentlessness, patience, and flexibility. This may apply to some terrorists somewhere, including at least a few of those involved in the Sept. 11 attacks. But it scarcely describes the vast majority of those individuals picked up on terrorism charges in the United States since those attacks.

In describing the "adversary," the case studies far more commonly use words like incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, unorganized, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, irrational, foolish, and gullible. Many of the cases suggest that there is little exaggeration in the 2010 film, *Four Lions*, the impressive dark comedy about a band of hapless home-grown British terrorists.

Amazingly, the Boston perpetrators apparently thought they could somehow get away with their deed even though they chose to set their bombs off at the most-photographed spot on the planet at the time. Moreover, although they were not prepared to die with

their bombs, they do not seem to have had anything that could be considered a coherent plan of escape. This rather bizarre inability to think about the aftermath of the planned deed is quite typical in the case studies. (Also commonly found: an inability to explain how killing a few random people would advance their cause.)

The Boston perpetrators seem never to have ventured much more than a few miles from the bombing location, and they appear to have had no reliable means of transport and no money. Then, when the police published their photographs, they mindlessly blew whatever cover they had by killing a campus cop, hijacking a car, stealing money, trying to run a police blockade, and engaging in a brief Hollywood-style car chase and shootout.

Surveillance imagery played an important role in identifying the terrorists (as it did in terrorist events in London in 2005), but the key breakthrough appears to have come when the culprits decided to leave their lair, after which the police applied standard killer-on-the-loose methodology.

And while the scope of the tragedy in Boston should not be minimized, it should also be noted that, if the terrorists' aim was to kill a large number of people, their bombs failed miserably. As recent cases in Colorado and Connecticut sadly demonstrate, far more fatalities have been inflicted by gunmen**.**

Boston appears to be a lone-wolf attack—albeit one with two wolves—in the sense that no one besides the bombers seems to have been aware of it. Attacks in which only the perpetrator knows about the plans are obviously more difficult to avert than ones involving a great number of talkative people. (In some cases, would-be terrorists have advertised for support or collaborators on Facebook and in Internet chat rooms.) Before Boston, some 16 people had been killed by Islamist terrorists in the United States in the years since 2001 (13 of them at Ft. Hood), and all of these were murdered by people who were essentially acting alone.

Concern about "lone wolf" attacks has grown in recent years, and a 2011 DHS assessment concluded that "lone offenders currently present the greatest threat." This is a reasonable observation, but those concerned should keep in mind that, as Max Abrahms has noted, while lone wolves may be difficult to police, they have carried out only two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist attacks over the last four decades. They may be harder to stop, but they are also less lethal. (It should also be kept in mind that an American's chance of being killed by any kind of terrorist, even with 9/11 included in the count, remains about one in 3 million or 4 million per year.)

It is still unclear what motivated the Boston bombers. We are hearing a lot about "radicalization," a concept that is not only vague but also questionably suggests, as Arun Kundnani has pointed out, that violence is inherent or implied in Muslims who become deeply religious.

Evidence from the 52 cases strongly indicates that assuming an ideological motivation for terrorism is not useful. In almost all the cases, the overwhelming driving force was not something that could be called ideology, but rather a simmering, and more commonly boiling, outrage at U.S. foreign policy—the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in particular, and the country's support for Israel in the Palestinian conflict. Religion was a part of the consideration for most, but not because they wished to spread Sharia law or to establish caliphates (few of the culprits would be able to spell either word). Rather

they wanted to protect their co-religionists against what was commonly seen to be a concentrated war upon them in the Middle East by the U.S. government.

Rather remarkably, none of the 52 cases after 9/11 has inspired much in the way of continued interest from the public and the media. After some days of coverage—or weeks in a very few instances—they largely faded from attention. This is impressive because some were actually rather threatening, and many were populated by colorful characters and involve interesting law-and-order issues. Books have been written about only two of the cases, and neither appears to have sold very well. Whether the Boston Marathon case will prove to be an exception—perhaps because of its venue and the manhunt—is yet to be seen, of course.

Boston might trigger some panicky and costly security measures, just as past terrorist efforts have inspired wars on shoes, liquids, and underwear at airports. In this case, the surveillance camera market is likely to experience a windfall, and we can expect a fair amount of heightened security at sporting events and a whole lot of hand-wringing about the immigration system. But, given budget difficulties, there is a distinct prospect that the new measures will be limited.